



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FORECAST FOR GEESE UP--DUCKS DOWN ON ALL FLYWAYS THIS FALL

The pintails and teal often arrive even before the leaves start to turn, then the mallards, black ducks, widgeon, and other ducks, and the geese come along later. By October or November, on the average, peak numbers should reach from four to six million geese and a hundred million ducks.

But 1981, according to recent breeding ground surveys, will not be an average year for waterfowl production. A devastating storm tide swept through one of the most important goose nesting areas in the Far North, wildfires raged in others, and a withering drought lingered into its second year in the heart of North America's main duck-producing region.

"What was lacking, and what is needed in the northern prairies," George Brakhage of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Migratory Bird Management Office explained, "are some good fall rains, an early freeze that seals the ground, heavy winter snows, and a quick run-off to refill the marshes and potholes. Given favorable wetlands and nesting habitat conditions, the ducks can take care of themselves. A couple of such breeding seasons will go a long way toward restoring fall flights."

Though rains brought temporary respite to drought-ridden croplands of the Great Plains and Canadian Prairie Provinces, they came too late for millions of ducks that traditionally nest in these areas and had no lasting effect on wetlands. Thousands of the famous Prairie Potholes were either dry during the critical spring months, or were shrunk so that there were wide, barren, predator-tracked margins between nesting cover and the water.

How much damage these conditions have done to waterfowl nesting won't be fully known until the fall migrations reach their peak. But duck numbers are predicted to be down to about what they were last fall or possibly even lower. The news, however, isn't all bad. The numbers of geese--in spite of the setbacks--should be higher. The population of some species, the breeding ground surveys indicated, are forecast to be "noticeably" higher.

Breeding ground surveys provide important information for setting waterfowl hunting regulations in the United States. They are conducted in a cooperative effort between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, State and Provincial wildlife agencies, Ducks Unlimited, and the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Agriculture.

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Ducks:

The persistent drought again adversely affected duck nesting in the vital Prairie Potholes. Flights are expected to be the same as the less-than-average number noted last fall.

Central Flyway

Geese:

Canada geese in the Central Flyway, with one possible exception, found favorable nesting conditions. Those wintering in southeastern Colorado and nearby portions of Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico are expected to be in stronger numbers. However, the "Hi-line Population" which nests in Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountain States, suffered from drought and will be scarcer on their north-central Colorado wintering area.

White-fronted geese nest throughout western Arctic Canada and Alaska where habitat conditions were at least as good as last year. An increased flight is expected to their Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast wintering areas.

Ducks:

A poor production year, the fall flight of ducks will be about the same as 1980.

Pacific Flyway

Geese:

Canada geese are expected to be up in numbers from last year's flight. However, Dusky Canada geese fared less well on their nesting grounds in the Copper River Delta of southeastern Alaska, and a decreased flight to the Willamette wintering area in Oregon is expected.

Most Lesser Canada geese nest in Alaska. Except for the serious flooding of the Yukon Flats, lessers had good nesting conditions.

At Wrangel Island, Russian biologists reported 40,000 nesting pairs of Lesser snow geese, the most they'd seen in a decade. An increased flight is expected to Pacific Northwest and California wintering areas.

Cacklers, the smallest of all Canada geese, nest along the Bering Sea, mainly between the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. Primarily because of the storm tide that swept through their nesting grounds last spring, a decreased flight is predicted on their return to Oregon and California.

White-fronted geese, wintering in California, found good nesting conditions in the western Canadian Arctic and Alaska. The fall flight is predicted to be at least as good as last year.

Ducks:

Pacific Flyway duck flights will continue their downward trend with no improvement in numbers over last year. However, waterfowl concentrations will build on good wintering areas, sometimes to great numbers--even in poor waterfowl years such as this. Habitat is the key ingredient.

It would be impossible for the international survey crews to cover the entire breeding grounds of ducks and geese, but key parts are sampled each year using air and ground surveys, aerial photographs, and satellite imagery. Thus, not only are the famous duck-breeding grounds of the mid-continental Prairie Pothole region scanned, but also goose-nesting grounds otherwise known only to Eskimos, a few fur traders, and explorers--literally at the ends of the earth.

The condition of the habitat and the availability of food, water, and cover are of primary importance. But very critical for goose nesting is the northward melt of the snowline. Dictated by the unforgiving schedule of the Far North, nesting must be initiated by June 15, or goose production is markedly decreased. When the snow melt and subsequent goose nesting in northern areas is delayed, the goslings may not have time to reach flight stage before the fall freeze.

This year's snow melt was on, or ahead of schedule, indicating a good nesting season for geese. Here, by flyways, are the predictions for the fall flights of migratory waterfowl:

Atlantic Flyway

Geese:

The Atlantic population of Canada geese nests from southern Hudson Bay northeastward to Newfoundland. Conditions of these nesting grounds were about the same as last year, so the fall migration to the Delmarva Peninsula and the Eastern shore will be unchanged.

Greater snow geese, which nest in the High Arctic near Greenland and winter along the mid-Atlantic coast, have had a good year and will be seen in increased numbers.

Atlantic brant found good nesting conditions throughout their breeding grounds from Greenland to the Queen Maud Gulf on Canada's mid-Arctic coast. A noticeable increase is forecast when they return to their mid-Atlantic coastal wintering areas.

Ducks:

The fall duck flights will be similar to last year's below average level. Black ducks, however, may be up slightly--at least from last year.

Mississippi Flyway

Geese:

Most of the Canada geese that come down the Mississippi flyway nest in tundra areas in northern Ontario and northeast Manitoba. Generally, nesting conditions were less than favorable, and smaller flights are expected to arrive at wintering areas in southern Illinois and adjacent portions of Kentucky.

Lesser snow geese nesting in arctic and sub-arctic areas enjoyed good nesting conditions and should show an increase this year.